DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 347 904 HE 025 667

AUTHOR Sondak, Eileen M.; Sondak, Norman E.
TITLE Globalizing the Introductory Business Communications Course.
PUB DATE 26 Mar 92
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Eastern Michigan University Conference on Languages and Communication for World Business and the Professions (11th, Ypsilanti, MI, March 25-28, 1992).
PUB TYPE Reports - General (140) -- Guides - General (050) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Business Administration Education; *Business Communication; Classroom Techniques; *Communication Skills; *Cultural Awareness; Curriculum Development; Educational Needs; Foreign Culture; Global Approach; Higher Education; Instructional Design; *Intercultural Communication; Postsecondary Education
IDENTIFIERS California (San Diego)

ABSTRACT

This paper first examines the reasons for the lack of interest in international communication in required introductory business communications courses at schools of higher education. It then describes the effort to incorporate the principles and practices of global communications in an introductory business communication course in San Diego (California). Defined are the three primary goals of international communications: (1) a message should be fully understood by the receiver, with no change or loss of meaning from the original conceived by the sender; (2) a message should achieve the desired results, without requiring further communications to clarify those goals; and (3) a message should achieve continuation of good will, even if there are points of disagreement between the parties. The paper offers a set of tools and techniques to prepare students to achieve these goals in both written and oral business communications. A handout of tips for improving intercultural communication is attached. Contains 10 references. (GLR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

GLOBALIZING THE INTRODUCTORY BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS COURSE

Eileen M. Sondak
Department of Business
San Diego City College

and

Norman E. Sondak
IDS Department
San Diego State University

ED347904

HE025-667

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Eileen M. Sondak

Norman E. Sondak

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

GLOBALIZING THE INTRODUCTORY BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS COURSE

Eileen M. Sondak
Department of Business
San Diego City College

and

Norman E. Sondak
IDS Department
San Diego State University

ABSTRACT

Despite a growing awareness among business communications instructors -- and pressure from their departments to expand instruction on the subject -- few, if any, required introductory business communications courses do more than pay lip serve to the topic.

There are several reasons for this situation. The first is that most instructors in the introductory course do not understand the unique and complex problems of international and intercultural business communications. The second is that there is little in the way of support for international business and intercultural communications in the popular textbooks used for the introductory course. Finally, there is a dearth of instructional materials (case studies, research sources, paper topics, vignettes, and lecture goals/objectives/outlines) to support class assignments and lectures.

This paper defines the three primary goals of international communications as follows:

* A message should be fully understood by the receiver, with no change or loss of meaning from the original conceived by the sender.
* A message should achieve the desired results, without requiring further communications to clarify those goals.
* A message should achieve continuation of good will, even if there are points of disagreement between the parties.

It presents a set of tools and techniques to prepare students to achieve these goals in both written and oral business communications. The paper also cites actual classroom experiences in delivering introductory business communications courses that realistically address the needs of students interested in world business.

HE 025 667

INTRODUCTION

During the years since the end of World War II, the Earth has become more and more a global village. Modern transportation and communication technologies allow people, goods, and messages to move across continents and oceans at unprecedented speeds. The economies of nations are so interdependent that most American firms expect a significant portion of their revenues to be generated by international marketing programs.

Although course curriculums throughout the University system are becoming increasingly sensitive to global factors, business communications courses must be even more focused than the rest, because of their direct relevance to international business.

The impact of international business has not been lost on Colleges and Schools of Business in the United States. Accrediting agencies, such as the AACSB (American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business) now require that all bachelor and master's level degree programs include a worldwide business component. The responsibility to implement these innovations in the classroom falls on the faculty.

These courses must be general enough to deal with the complexities and perplexities of international communications. Yet, despite the growing awareness among business communications instructors -- and pressure from their department chairs and college administrations to expand coverage -- few, if any, required introductory business communications courses do more than pay lip serve to the topic right now.

What are the reasons for this unfortunate situation?

There are several causes. The first is that most instructors charged with the introductory course have only a minimal understanding of the unique and complex problems of international and intercultural business communications. This is exacerbated by the fact that the introductory course is often allocated to junior members of the staff, with less general business and teaching experience than senior staff members.

The second reason is that there is little in the way of support for international business and intercultural communications in the popular textbooks used for the introductory course. For example, BUSINESS COMMUNICATION TODAY by Bovee & Thill devotes only about 20 of its 657 pages to the topic, while WRITING AND SPEAKING IN BUSINESS by Vik, Wilkinson, & Wilkinson has only about 17 pages on the subject in a text 636 pages long.

Unfortunately, several other business communications texts overlook the subject entirely, as is the case with FUNDAMENTALS OF BUSINESS COMMUNICATION by Henson & Means.

Finally, there is a dearth of supporting instructional materials (case studies, research sources, paper topics, vignettes, and lecture goals/objectives/outlines) to augment class assignments and lectures. Since most introductory courses have a large student-to-faculty ratio, and an overload of graded assignments, faculty members have insufficient time to experiment with or develop new course materials on this timely subject.

INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS AND THE SAN DIEGO COMMUNITY

International business is by its very nature, to some degree geographically independent. However, there are certain areas of the United States that are more impacted by

international considerations than others, due to their particular locations. San Diego is a prime example of this condition.

First, San Diego is a border town, situated on the international border between the U.S. and Mexico, and on the Pacific Rim. San Diego is also a major seaport, with one of the finest all-weather harbors in the world.

Much of the pioneering work in aviation was conducted in the city and county of San Diego, and in nearby Southern California. Today, San Diego supports a large aviation/ manufacturing complex and is home base to major commercial and military aviation operations. San Diego is also the West Coast terminus of a number of railroads and several major interstate highways.

The population of San Diego is rich in ethnic diversity, with well developed, well established, and respected Latino and Asian communities. The area is largely bilingual, with Spanish- speaking radio and television coverage, and a multiplicity of languages spoken in the county.

The superb climate of San Diego is such that it can readily serve as home to peoples from all over the world. And, the real estate costs and tax schedules in the city and county are among the most reasonable in the state. This has encouraged many Asian businesses to choose San Diego and nearby counties for their U.S. headquarters.

In short, San Diego is a natural home for international business, and job opportunities abound for capable individuals with a background in international business.

Because of these factors, the academic institutions in San Diego must take a leadership position in international business education. This paper describes the effort to incorporate the principles and practices of global communications in an introductory business communication course.

GOALS OF INTERNATIONALIZING BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS

The basic criteria for good business communications on an international level can be briefly stated as follows:

1. **Clarity**. The meaning the receiver gets from the communication should be the meaning the sender intended. The communication should be fully understood by the receiver, with no change or loss of meaning from the original conceived by the sender.

2. **Effectiveness**. The communication should achieve the desired results, without requiring further communications. The style, organization, and visual content of the communication should assist the receiver in understanding the communication. The information in the communication should be accurate, and free from errors.

3. **Goodwill**. A communication should achieve continuation of good will between the parties, even if there are points of disagreement within the communication. The communication should present a positive image of the sender and his or her organization.

While it is relatively straightforward to set down criteria for successful international business communication, it is far more difficult to actually achieve success among cross-cultural communicators.

In fact, it is no small feat to successfully communicate within an individual's own culture, let alone across international boundaries. This is due to the fact that the perception and interpretation of any business communication depends upon many subtle factors. Among the many variables to be considered, are the purpose of the communication, the communication skills of the sender, the state of mind of the receiver, and the general business situation at the time.

According to the basic tenets of business communications (based on psychological realities), every message must be adapted to its intended audience, even if all parties speak the same language. You cannot expect a message to "work" in every instance. The writer must empathize with the audience and personalize the contents in accordance with reader's special interests.

Words do not mean the same thing to everyone who speaks the language, and connotative meanings can vary widely among people - - even within the same cultural milieu.

If successful business communication is so inherently difficult, what techniques can be employed to bring international business communication -- with all its additional challenges and constraints -- within the reach of introductory students?

TOOLS TO INTERNATIONALIZE BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS

There are a number of heuristics that can be used to aid introductory students in their international business communications. First, students must be informed that good communication is good communication, no matter where the message originates. Great works of literature, art, dance, movies, and drama can convey their meaning across cultures. Students should not be intimidated by the differences between people. Rather, they should seek out the similarities, and build their communications around them.

One fundamental caveat in intercultural communications is that students must pay even more attention to detail, and adhere strictly to the principles that govern all good business communications.

Regardless of the cultural circumstances, a good communicator must always focus on the "you-attitude." That is, your communications should empathize with the receiver and stress reader benefits.

In international communications, this also involves an understanding of the reader's culture. Students must be aware that cultures differ in more ways than just language. Values, laws, religions, individual goals, politics, symbols, gestures, time and space considerations, eye contact, and fundamental social structures, are just some of the important differences among cultural groups.

And, to make matters more complex, countries are not homogeneous. Just as there are differences between New England and the Deep South in this country, there are major regional differences in most of the industrial countries of the world.

Word usage can differ dramatically between regions. For example, when a visitor from New York traveled to nearby Worcester, Massachusetts, she found that no one understood her need for a drink of water when she asked for the "water fountain." Instead, she was told the only fountain in the city was in front of the War Memorial. When she finally conveyed the message that she was thirsty, she was directed to the "bubbler" down the hall.

Compound that with the connotative differences experienced with common words, such as "cheap" (inexpensive or poor in quality?), liberal (a political label or a description of a free thinker?), and you can see why the true meaning of messages is frequently lost.

Several classic cases in international marketing serve to illustrate this type of cultural complication in business. One of the prime examples is that of the Chevrolet Nova. The car was a failure in Spanish-speaking countries, because the name "Nova" sounds like "no va," which in Spanish means, "doesn't go."

In another case, a cosmetic firm was about to name its new shampoo "Dreck," (to capitalize on another well know other shampoo, "Breck") until their research uncovered that the word "dreck" carries a very negative connotation in German.

Therefore, in developing international business communications, the student should focus on the following five steps:

1. **Create clear goals for the Message**. The sender must know exactly what he or she wants to achieve with the message, and must state it directly and straightforwardly, with words low in connotative meaning. That means that the sender must clearly understand what action the receiver is intended to perform as a result of the message, and what impression the message should leave with the receiver.

2. **Simplicity**. A cardinal first rule for successful international business communications is "keep the message short and simple." This is often referred to as the KISS (Kept It Short and Simple) principle. Simplicity is a cornerstone of all good communications, but it is imperative with international messages.

Specifically, this means use short, meaningful, sentences. Limit the vocabulary to action verbs, and concrete words. Avoid the stiff, legalistic language and complex grammatical structures that, unfortunately, still characterize too many business correspondences. Avoid idiomatic expressions. Languages are structured differently, and idioms are difficult to translate at best. In some cases, no suitable translations exist for an idiom. Even if the readers are familiar with English, they are likely to misunderstand idioms, slang expressions, and jargon.

As a rule of thumb, with the exception of relevant technical terminology, the vocabulary in the message should be kept at the 8th to 10th grade level. However, students must be warned not to equate poor English skills with any lack of intelligence on the part of the receiver. Never talk down to a communications partner.

Decision-making time may vary among cultures, so instruct students to be aware that some of their international communications partners may not be as efficiency-minded. Cultures even differ about who makes the decisions and on the amount of detail that should be worked out by the primary decision makers. It is often considered careless to leave minor details to subordinates.

3. **Understand Cultural Differences from the Receiver**. In general, Americans communicate in English. We normally use a friendly, polite style, with limited respect for rank or authority. The emphasis is on directness, openness, and efficiency, and Americans tend to be time-conscious and impatient with formality or ritual.

By contrast, the Japanese are modest, private, and contemplative. They are much more patient, slow in reacting, and formal. They exhibit a much greater respect for rank and authority, and greater loyalty to the organization. They put more value on formal ritual than efficiency and directness.

While the above discussion unquestionably reflects stereotypical views of Americans and Japanese, it serves as an effective model for understanding the cultural diversity among communications partners. It also underscores the need to acquaint students with the cultural constraints inherent in international communications.

However, ultimately all messages are sent to individuals, and the finished message must reflect your analysis of the person and the situation.

4. **Use Visuals**. One picture is worth a thousand words in any language. In international communications, its value increases dramatically, because pictures are language independent. Therefore, wherever applicable, messages should contain graphics and images that bypass language limitations and enhance basic comprehension.

Electronic spreadsheet programs support business graphics for data display and analysis, while drawing and drafting programs simplify the production of illustrations and technical drawings. Students should also be made aware of the potential value of project

scheduling diagrams and charts, along with flowcharts and data flow diagrams to show procedures.

Another inherent advantage in using visuals is the general practice of employing English as the universal language for labeling charts and graphs.

5. **Review the Message Before Sending**. It is a maxim that good business communications are not written, they are rewritten. This holds doubly true for international communications. They should always be carefully reviewed, and if needed, revised before they are sent. If possible, it is wise to obtain the advice of a native of the destination country, particularly if this is a first contact message.

The message should also be edited with an aim toward ferreting out information that can be presented with charts, graphs, or other graphic means.

Elements to be Considered before Sending an International Communication

Values and behaviors of the recipients. Religious as well as cultural factors enter into the mix here. Learn all you can about the cultures you deal with regularly. Ethnocentric reactions are significant barriers to communication, but they can be resolved, if you keep an open mind and avoid being judgmental.

The degree of formality preferred by your readers. This differs greatly from very informal and direct to rigidly formal and subtle. Americans tend to be the least reserved in our business transactions.

Roles and Status -- Cultural factors dictate the roles people play and even the hierarchy of communication partners.

Is your communication as simple and concise as possible? Eliminate abstractions, slang, and colloquial expressions that can easily be misunderstood by people who learned English through formal instruction, rather than daily usage.

If you use translators, check for translation errors by having the meanings verified. Use translators that are familiar with your subject area as well as the foreign language.

Watch for telltale signs that your message has not been clearly interpreted. You cannot count on the reader to take responsibility for any misunderstanding. Miscommunication can be a serious problem in both written and oral messages. As a result, it is beneficial to learn the foreign language if you intend to have a long-term relationship with the receiver.

ORAL AND NONVERBAL COMMUNICATIONS

The current trend is moving more and more toward personalized communications. Modern multimedia systems allow video and audio segments to be readily incorporated in

transmitted messages. Since modern business is ideally conducted on a face-to-face basis, multimedia technology is an excellent tool for international business people.

Students should be aware of the inherent problems with oral communications on a global basis, and the differences in meanings attached to nonverbal communications in other parts of the world.

Elements to be Considered before Engaging in Oral Communications on an International Level:

Enunciation -- Articulate sounds clearly and pronounce words precisely.

Delivery -- Use a somewhat slower delivery rate, but do not speak down to your audience. Avoid any distracting mannerisms. Do not speak too loudly.

Eye Contact -- Considered rude in some cultures. Lack of it considered dishonest in others.

Facial Expressions -- Smiling considered friendly in some cultures. Others control their feelings and view any emotional display as a sign of weakness.

Gestures -- Meanings vary widely among different cultural groups.
The American "OK" gesture is considered obscene by many cultural groups, particularly in Hispanic countries.

Personal Space -- Some cultures prefer more personal space and feel threatened by close proximity, particularly among members of the opposite sex.

Touch -- Even the ceremonial shaking of hands has different interpretations among people, especially among cultures that are sensitive to social status and gender differences.

Conversational Style -- Pauses, compliments, apologies, aggressiveness, interruptions, and even questioning procedures may have different meanings to people from other cultural backgrounds.

If you use an interpreter, avoid talking at the interpreter and be conscious of focusing your attention on the receivers. Encourage questions if you perceive any lack of understanding.

Respect other cultures. Remember the old axiom, "when in Rome, do as the Romans." It is easy to alienate people when you show even subtle signs of disrespect or disinterest in their customs and beliefs.

STUDENT EXERCISES

Exhibit I is a copy of a handout distributed to San Diego City College business communications students. It features a list of basic tips for improving both written and oral intercultural communications. Included are pointers on anticipating crosscultural problems, understanding cultural differences, and overcoming language and other barriers to good global communication.

A set of class assignments designed to give the students some experience and appreciation for international business communications are presented below:

Exercise I

Rewrite the bad news letter describing a late shipment -- aimed at an American audience -- making any necessary changes or additions to adapt the message to readers in Germany and Japan.

Hint: German business people like directness. They prefer messages without buffers. Japanese are more subtle in their communications. They take their time coming to the main point and rarely spell out the bad news directly. It is preferable to allow Japanese readers to assume these conclusions for themselves, based on the facts.

How would the organization differ between your messages?

Would the tone and choice of words be any different?

Exercise II

Prepare order forms and trade documents for shipment to France and India. Be sure to pay attention to the preferred method of stating weights and measures (U.S. or Canadian), and use the appropriate monetary values, rather than stating them in American dollars.

Use the forms we prepared for ABC Computer Company as your American guide.

Exercise III

The following assignment will require some library research to determine the appropriate etiquette.

Answer these questions correctly for business contacts in Spain, Japan, and Saudi Arabia.

1. How do they react to strangers?
2. When you enter a room, is it appropriate to shake hands, bow, or nod?
3. How do you politely refuse an invitation?
4. What is the best way of showing respect?
5. Are any gestures or expressions considered rude?
6. How close should you stand, and what is their attitude on eye contact?

7. How much do they value punctuality?
8. How do they feel about getting right down to business?
9. Is it considered a compliment to bring a gift of food?
10. Is it appropriate to talk politics in social situations?

Exercise IV

Identify potential sources of miscommunication in the following situations.

1. It is 11:30 a.m. and a Mexican customer has not arrived for an 11:00 meeting. The American sales person leaves the restaurant, annoyed that her contact has not even given her the courtesy of a cancellation. Perhaps, they don't respect her, because she is a woman.

2. Your company is interested in a job candidate from Vietnam, but you do not feel he will make a good manager, because he never looks you in the eye and acts very obsequious when you question him about his accomplishments for his present employer.

3. A Japanese businessman comes to your office in a plush Los Angeles high-rise. You expect him to be very impressed by your status -- a large roomy office, furnished with the finest accessories. You have no doubt he will want to do business with you.

REFERENCES

Balsley, H., and V. Clover, Research For Business Decisions: Business Research Methods, 4th Edition, Publishing Horizons, Inc., Columbus, OH, 1988

Bovee, C. and J. Thill, Business Communications Today, 3rd Edition, Random House, New York, 1992

Harcourt, J., A. Krizan, and P. Merrier, Business Communication, 2nd Edition, South-Western, Cincinnati, OH, 1991

Henson, C., and T. Means, Fundamentals of Business Communication , South-Western, Cincinnati, OH, 1990

Huseman, R., J. Lahill, and J. Penrose, Business Communication-Strategies and Skills, The Dryden Press, Chicago, IL, 1991

Kuiper, S., and C. Luke, Report Writing-With Microcomputer Applications, South-Western, Cincinnati, OH, 1992

Lesikar, R. Basic Business Communication, IRWIN Homedale, IL

Locker, Kitty, Business and Administrative Communication, 2nd Edition, IRWIN Homedale, IL, 1992

Ruch, W. and M. Crawford, Business Reports-Written and Oral, PWS-KENT, Boston, MA, 1988

Vik, G., C. Wilkinson, and D. Wilkinson, Writing and Speaking in Business, 10th Edition, IRWIN Homedale, IL, 1990

EXHIBIT 1 - CLASS HANDOUT ON INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS

San Diego City College
Business Communications 119

Intercultural Communication in Business

Prepared by E. Sondak

Basic Tips for Improving Intercultural Communication

You must analyze and understand cultural differences, such as:

* Decision-making strategies
* Religions, customs, and values
* Status and roles
* Concepts on time and personal space
* Gestures and body language
* Social mores
* Ethnocentric behavior
* Attitudes toward accuracy and material success
* Acceptance of outsiders
* Use of explicit versus implicit communication techniques

to overcome barriers in:

* Written language
* Spoken language
* Etiquette
* Perceptions (stereotypes)

Where do You Start?

* Learn as much as possible about the culture (attitudes, beliefs, expectations, subcultures, behavioral norms)
* Empathize and respect cultural differences
* Avoid unfamiliar jargon, slang expressions, buzz words, and idioms -- anything that defies easy translation or comprehension
* Use simple grammatical structure and short, single-purpose sentences
* Focus on shared symbols, graphic images, and basic vocabulary
* Use concrete imagery and avoid generalizations or words with ambiguous meaning
* Be tolerant of other's ambiguities
* Be aware that subtle nuances can have great impact and that non-verbal signals can be misinterpreted
* Speak clearly and be careful of your pronunciation
* Be accurate in your spelling and use of grammar
* Be patient and persistent
* Be flexible in your communications techniques
* Consider their business traditions and personal style

If your communication partner has little or no English skills:

* Learn basic terms in their language (impractical to try to attain fluency if your intercultural communications are infrequent)
* Use translator (no guarantee you won't sacrifice some personalization and rapport)
* Eliminate extraneous words and rephrase as often as necessary
* Ask for feedback to confirm accuracy of the communication process
* Enunciate clearly and speak slowly and distinctly, but avoid talking down to person
* Be a good and careful listener
* Reiterate the message you receive to check for miscommunication
* Be aware of body language, and avoid distracting gestures